

# Enrollment drops at experimental high school

By Patricia Briske

Less than half of the students who initially signed up for an experimental high school in the Southwest Suburbs are staying there long enough to graduate.

Of the 72 freshmen in the first class of Ben Franklin High School three years ago, only 35 will come back as seniors next year.

Despite the fact that 50 percent is hardly a passing grade, officials in Consolidated High District 230 think that's fine — and that the much-heralded lab school experiment is working out well.

Parents of some children who have switched back to their home high schools — Sandburg, Stagg and Andrew — disagree, because the students had to repeat classes when they transferred.

Three years ago, District 230 opened the doors of a fourth high school, originally called the New Learning Center and later named Ben Franklin High School.

The structure was based on the theory of psychologist William Glasser, who said children need to focus on doing "quality work" rather than just finishing assignments according to the calendar.

That meant earning at least a B to get credit, and signing up for summer school if necessary, although that's called "the extended school year."

The other three tenets that underlie Franklin School are that students must take responsibility for their own behavior, evaluate their own performance and take ownership of the school.

The inaugural class has shrunk over time. Only 72 freshmen were admitted for the first year. The following year, 59 returned as sophomores, and this year, just 44 came back for their junior year. Next year, only 35 will be seniors.

The second year the school was open, some 99 children signed up as freshmen. The following year, only 54 returned as sophomores, and next year, just 46 will come back for their junior year.

This year's freshman class of 43 will dip to 38 sophomores next year.

To date, 43 children have signed up as freshmen at Franklin for the school year that starts in the fall.

Also, school officials say, half of the teachers who started at Franklin have left.

The shrinking numbers don't bother a variety of District 230 officials, however. Board of Education member Kay Coghill, Superintendent Tim Brown and Franklin Lead Teacher Linda Lavery all agree the experience to date shows that people didn't understand what the school would be.

"A lot of parents wanted their children to go here that first year," Lavery said. "That's in opposition to this educational philosophy."

"We're making it mandatory that for students to come here, it must be their own choice."

As for staff, Lavery said, "I hope teachers move in and out of Franklin. That makes it a site for staff development."

Coghill's daughter Amy is transferring from Franklin to Sandburg for her senior year for social reasons, she said. "She wants to meet more people," said Coghill, a psychologist who has used Glasser's theory in her practice and who maintains that Franklin is successful.

Brown says communication is the big problem.

"We did everything humanly possible to tell parents what to expect. That's not necessarily what they heard," the superintendent said.

Hickory Hills resident Shirley Dragas, whose son Mike was in the first freshman class but later transferred to Stagg, said she fully understood — and supported — Glasser's theory.

The problem, she said: that wasn't what District 230 delivered. "My son got very good grades, but I felt the grades were given to him," she said.

To earn honors credits, "all he had to do was write another two papers or help another student," she said.

Tinley Park resident Linda Brenner said her daughter Jennifer earned her science grade by typing documents for the teacher.

And some students who transferred out of Franklin wound up taking French I and Algebra I a second time when it turned out they hadn't completed as much work as students at the other three schools, despite the Franklin kids' final grades of As and Bs.

That's what happened to Becky Fink when she transferred to Andrew, said her mother, Donna Stewart of Tinley Park.

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"Becky lost four credits," Stewart said.

Lavery said, "We make quality the constant and time the variable. But we found out this type of self-pacing doesn't work for everyone if they move back to their home school."

Parents also complained about the administrators' behavior, say-

ing Lavery criticized students and their parents once she learned they were returning to their home schools.

But Lavery denied doing so. "I didn't take it personally when they left," she maintained.

The former Franklin students also said Lavery favored other students whose parents donated office equipment. Lavery disputes that as well.

Following Glasser's theory, administrators called school meetings to work out squabbles between students to ensure a "warm, supportive environment."

But Stewart said administra-

tors didn't call a meeting when one student brought a toy gun to school, handling it instead as a private matter.

Another parent added her independent recollection of what happened after the toy gun incident. Lavery said she didn't remember the particular incident, but said District 230 policy sometimes overrides Franklin policy.

More than anything, parents who were critical of the lab school were angry that their children might not have graduated in four years if they had stayed at Franklin.

Although all of those inter-

viewed for this story are earning As and Bs at their home schools, some already know they won't be able to get into a four-year college without attending a community college first because they don't have enough credits.

"They did what they were supposed to do," Stewart said. "They got good grades and they're being punished."

The extended school year, first offered at the end of the year, now includes a session during winter break and night tutoring by the teachers.

Students pay \$5 per day for the extra time, Lavery said.

## Survey shows present students like place

By Patricia Briske

Of the 141 students at Franklin High School this year, most told their parents in a recent survey that they like the place.

Just under half of them said they didn't realize how hard it would be to earn at least a B, a requirement called "doing quality work."

Many say their favorite time of the day is "quality time," when students schedule extra tutorials with their teachers.

School would be more fun if they had more field trips, kids noted.

And most students felt they "caused their own problems," according to the survey.

But the teen-agers also said they're teased at their home schools, where they go for gym and extracurricular activities.

Each respondent was asked to write one sentence saying how he or she felt about being a student at Franklin.

Freshmen replies, among others: "I am very proud to be at Franklin;" "I feel weird and proud of it;" and "I like Franklin a lot,

but wonder if I'm missing out on anything at home school."

Sophomores wrote: "I feel honored to be here;" "Being a BFHS student is hard work;" and "You have to be committed to excellence."

Juniors answered: "I feel lucky and proud;" "Being a student at Franklin can be a character-building experience, but only if you let it;" and "It is very stressful here."

Parents were pleased with the replies. "About 25 to 30 percent of the Franklin parents want to be involved, which is much higher than at most schools," said Elaine Bauer of Palos Park, one of the parents who conducted the survey.

The only official information Consolidated School District 230 officials are using to evaluate the lab school is the survey work performed by Stuart Swenson.

His study, funded by the Kellogg Institute, showed parents happy with the school.

Swenson's report says parents of transfer students did not fill out the survey, but a number of parents said they never received the questionnaire.

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## Individual student has bad memories of Franklin High

Jennifer Brunner was a member of the inaugural class at Franklin High School three years ago.

But in the middle of her sophomore year, she switched to Andover High School.

She and her parents have only bad memories after a school accident left her with trauma-induced epilepsy.

Jennifer said a classmate pulled out a chair she was going to sit on; instead, Jennifer landed on the floor and hit her head on the chair hard enough to black out.

Her mother, Linda Brunner, got a call about 20 minutes later, and that delay has aggravated the family to this day.

School officials maintain they followed proper procedure the day the accident happened. And Lead Teacher Linda Lavery said Franklin staff reached out to help Jennifer during her recovery, even visiting her in the hospital.

"Yeah, they went to the hospital," Linda Brunner said. "They went because they didn't want us to sue the school over what happened."

The Brunners say the head injury brought on a host of physical and emotional problems for Jennifer, but they claim Franklin staff "did nothing to help them."

Linda Brunner said Jennifer was out of school for six weeks recovering and suffered from a lot of headaches when she tried to return.

"Every time she got one, they called me to come pick her up," Brunner said. "Eventually Mrs. Lavery said, 'Why don't you just keep her at home until they stop?'"

"What, keep her at home for the rest of the school year?" Brunner asked. "I don't think so."

Jennifer said she spent the rest of the year and the beginning of her sophomore year arguing with staffers who didn't understand why she needed extra help.

She found irony in psychologist William Glasser's description of what the school environment should be like.

"Some warm, supportive environment that was," she said.

— By Patricia Briske

## Law firm hired over annexations

By Jef Rietsma

A supplementary law firm will handle business and legal aspects related to four parcels of land that were annexed into Orland Hills within the past six months.

The decision to hire Chicago-based Ancel, Glink, Diamond, Cope and Bush was approved by a 4-2 vote at last week's Board of Trustees meeting.

Orland Hills currently is represented by the firm Odelson and Sterk.

As a result of the vote, Ancel and associates will be asked to render a second opinion on matters related to 33 contiguous acres of land west of LaGrange Road that Orland Hills incorporated in December and January.

Trustee Christine Andrews, who made the motion to hire the second firm, said the action was necessary because of potential litigation regarding the area.

"We need protection here, and we need to find out what we can and can't do," Andrews said, referring to the potential ramifications of a forthcoming vote June 19.

Mayor Kyle Hastings last month said Orland Hills could face the

"largest lawsuit in the village's history" if its Board of Trustees doesn't agree to rezone the property in question to R-4 from its current status of R-1.

Under R-4 zoning in Orland Hills, residential density can exceed 12 units per acre. R-1 zoning in the village calls for roughly four units per acre.

Trustees will vote June 19 whether to rezone the property.

Hastings fears the developer proposing a 96-unit project on 10 acres of the land will sue the village if the rezoning is not granted. According to terms of the annexation agreement, the village would rezone the area to allow high-density development.

The proposed project would feature a density of 9.6 units per acre, and is being presented by Oak Lawn-based Mill Creek Development Inc.

Trustee John Murphy, who along with Andrews, Michael Puckett and John Corich voted to hire the additional law firm, said after the meeting that a second opinion on the matter is necessary because "the mayor has Odelson and Sterk in his back pocket."

"With the statutes the way they

are, the mayor has a lot of power to work with our attorney, especially on legal issues like this," Murphy said. "There is a feeling that the village attorney is swayed by the mayor."

Hastings supports the change to R-4 zoning.

Murphy said if attorneys from the supplemental firm verify that denying the R-4 zoning would lead to a legal challenge, he will vote for the change.

"I don't want the village involved in a lawsuit any more than any other person on the board," Murphy said. "If we risk putting ourselves in a legal position by not rezoning, as the mayor has implied, then I will vote to rezone to avoid a lawsuit."

He added "it's a matter of being comfortable with how to vote," that justifies hiring the Ancel firm.

Trustee Marty McGill criticized the motion, saying a second law firm is not necessary.

"There are no lawsuits implemented against the village, so I can't see Orland Hills taxpayers paying for the services of two attorneys," McGill said. "We had two attorneys once before and we got rid of them, and now we're bringing

them back."

The Ancel firm was hired as a supplemental legal firm more than two years ago, but their services were suspended following a vote by the board in 1995.

Trustee Don Bigos, who also voted against the motion, said if there was a question or concern about the annexation, then such issues should have been addressed while the matter was being discussed at respective committee levels.

Hastings also condemned the motion, saying "it sends a bad message to developers and Orland Hills residents."

"I'm ashamed to be a part of this, it's an embarrassment to Orland Hills," Hastings said. "We're writing a blank check to a high-priced law firm, and legal expenses incurred with the second law firm are not covered by our insurance."

The Odelson and Sterk firm charges \$95 an hour, while services from the Ancel firm when they last worked with the village were billed at \$140 an hour, Hastings said.

Murphy said the cost incurred from using the second firm "pales in comparison" to expenses the village would pay resolving a lawsuit.

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